

Ethics Primer for Use with Sigma Pi Sigma case studies

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A Definition of Ethics:

Ethics, or moral philosophy, involves systematizing, defending, and recommending concepts of right and wrong behavior (from: <http://www.iep.utm.edu/e/ethics.htm>).

There are many different ethical theories that provide a framework for conducting a discussion of an ethics-related issue. Many of these theories assume a certain world-view as a starting point. One approach is to choose a theory that is minimally influenced by a particular belief system or cultural orientation. One such theory is Duty Theory, which has many elements that could pertain to discussions of ethics in science setting.

Duty Theory:

The Duty Theory of W. D. Ross (from: <http://www.iep.utm.edu/e/ethics.htm>), is summarized by seven duties that reflect humans' actual moral convictions or obligations:

- *Fidelity*: the duty to keep promises
- *Reparation*: the duty to compensate others when we harm them
- *Gratitude*: the duty to thank those who help us
- *Justice*: the duty to recognize merit
- *Beneficence*: the duty to improve the conditions of others
- *Self-improvement*: the duty to improve our virtue and intelligence
- *Nonmaleficence*: the duty not to injure others

Duty Theory appears to be structured such that one goal of humans' moral/ethical choices is to enable mutually beneficial human relations.

Competing Consequentialist Theories:

Consequentialist ethics involves a cost-benefit analysis of actions, and can help provide additional framework for resolving conflicts among one or more of Ross's duties. The following definitions may be helpful (from: <http://www.iep.utm.edu/e/ethics.htm>):

- *Consequentialism*: An action is morally right (ethical) if the consequences of that action are more favorable than unfavorable.
- *Ethical Egoism*: An action is ethical if the consequences of that action are more favorable than unfavorable only to the agent performing the action.
- *Ethical Altruism*: An action is ethical if the consequences of that action are more favorable than unfavorable to everyone except the agent performing the action.
- *Utilitarianism*: An action is ethical if the consequences of that action are more favorable than unfavorable to everyone, or at least a dominant majority of those affected.

Conducting Your Discussion:

The REU program at the University of Pittsburgh suggests the following questions for guiding a discussion on ethics (from: <http://www.phyast.pitt.edu/~reupfom/ethics.html>):

- Who are the primary stakeholders?
- What are the relevant facts?
- What are the ethical issues? – **Here is where you can apply the above ethical theories.**
- What are the possible alternatives?
- What are the ethics of the alternatives?
- What are the practical constraints?
- What actions should be taken?
- Other general questions?